

## ENIGMATTERS

# For better times



MOHAMMAD ALI SATTAR

**I**T'S the people who continue to suffer. Nevertheless, with patience and perseverance, they repose faith in the learned leaders. If Khaleda Zia

asked the government to step down or face the music, it's not entirely her fault. She upholds the culture and practice of politics that we chose to own. She is only repeating history. The opposition leader demanded the same when Khaleda Zia assumed power. Khaleda was even warned that the opposition wouldn't let her in peace even for day.

Today, as leader of the opposition, she has every right to make demands. She can even ask the government to resign. But how far are her demands justified? Even if she has strong enough reasons to put forward, she should make best and effective use of the parliament. That is where she belongs. She is the leader of the opposition in Parliament; a position of importance and dignity. The lawmakers and people will listen to her in all earnest. The government will be put on test. But what have we made of the parliament?

The history of parliament is not healthy either. There has been continuous boycott of the House by the opposition on various grounds, most of them being insubstantial, to say the least. The continuous absence of the opposition from the House, naturally allows the government to carry the business according to its will. That's what is happening till today. This, I am afraid, has become the convention. A damaging practice!

The government party also plays an effective role in making the parliament ineffective. On many occasions, the ruling party lawmakers use unparliamentary terms to refer to the opposition, this naturally creates a hostile situation in the House. This



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*Let a new scenario start with a dialogue between Sk. Hasina and Khaleda Zia, for we look for better times.*

use of majority force makes it easy for the opposition to say quits and walk out. The party in power should have a new agenda and accommodative approach to make the opposition sit in the House and make it workable.

There are points in abundance to make against the government. The government has not been performing at all in many sectors. The law and order situation and price hike of essentials are two main avenues where the government has failed miserably. Things are not getting any better. Add to it the stock market manipulation. It seems the stock market ghost appears only during the AL's tenure. The opposition could take all of these to the parliament. They opted not to, lest they are looked upon as weaker adversary.

In a democracy, one has the right to speech and freedom of thought. Sheikh Hasina and Begum Zia both are experienced prime ministers, opposition leaders and party heads. Both are on the same plane, politically speaking. Both have been a

vibrant force in our politics for three decades. Power changed hands between them. But somewhere down the line they failed to reach the expectations of the people. They failed to realise this. And there lies the poverty. Our political poverty has grown larger than any other poverty that wanders on our landscapes. We talk about failings of parties and governments more than we express concern about soaring prices of essentials or unbearable social conditions.

In spite of the weakening conditions that the people finds themselves in, a few honourable ministers still try in vain to convince us that things aren't as bad as we think they are. Ministers would do us great favour by not saying things that they don't believe in. It does not help anyone. I bet they realise this. Maybe they don't enjoy selling these, but are compelled by the situation and the culture.

About the culture, we have managed only to grow a political culture

devoid of philosophy and sagacity. Aristocracy in politics is a thing of past. Today, we have a different mindset and a bizarre way of doing things.

If the tale of the present government is not a good one, rule of the BNP and its allies hasn't been impressive either. When BNP and its allies came to power for the second time in 2001, many hoped for better days. It's not our fault that we want to see something new and hear something positive. But wishes remain wishes. The four-party alliance with a 2/3rd majority, was given the opportunity to make or break the country. They could not make anything noteworthy except a few patch works here and there.

The last caretaker government, which stretched its span disregarding the constitution, raised hype by chasing the corrupt individuals from all sectors, be it private or public. Some cases may have been exaggerated; nonetheless many were true. It appeared corruption would take its flight permanently from Bangladesh. Alas, that did not happen. This time too the people were befooled.

Even a caretaker government, with no popular mandate, dared to override the constitution. Our constitution was compromised many a time, belittling our pride as a nation yearning for democracy. We saw one party rule, military rule, multiparty democracy, etc., but each time the constitution was readjusted to suit the needs of the party or individual. Wrong use of democratic rights!

To the leaders, please make it your obligation to keep the parliament alive, come to common terms in areas of national interest, make politics healthy by creating healthy instances of tolerance and mutual respect, give us a substitute to violent hartal and allow democracy to flourish. Let a new scenario dawn with a dialogue between Sk. Hasina and Khaleda Zia, for we look for better times.

The writer is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

## Rescue mission in Libya

No time to wait

**A**T long last some moves are afoot to start evacuating Bangladeshis trapped in Tripoli. A planeload of them has already come back home. One of our naval ships has reached Lebanon on way to Tripoli. The PM in a cabinet meeting has directed all concerned to stay prepared for evacuation of Bangladeshis by air and sea. In a country where the political chaos has already cost thousands of lives and 60,000 Bangladeshis have been stranded, their lives at risk, there is no gainsaying the urgency of rescuing them.

Some of the Bangladeshi workers have been relocated by the companies where they were employed, while others were able to cross the border into safer territory such as Tunisia and Egypt where they have been given shelter by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). However, the majority of workers remain stranded -- some abandoned even by their employers who themselves had to flee to safety -- without food, money or any means of getting out of the strife-torn country. How much worse must the situation get before the government will consider rescuing them? According to the Expatriates' Welfare Secretary, they will be evacuated with planes and ships if and when an international armed operation begins. Until then, it seems they will be left to their own devices.

We urge the government to start tackling the situation before the situation deteriorates further. The first task is to locate the Bangladeshis who are dispersed throughout several large cities in Libya and to then begin rescue efforts. We hope that the Foreign Minister's trip to Geneva to seek help from the ICRC and IOM will help matters. Teams have already been dispatched to Egypt and Tunisia to help the stranded workers obtain travel documents which will enable them to exit Libya and enter these countries. If there are those who do not wish to leave the country -- as the Expatriates' Welfare Minister has suggested -- they will remain there at their own risk. For the rest, it is the government's duty to rescue and protect its migrant workers who not only contribute significantly in terms of remittance but whose safety as Bangladeshi citizens is the ultimate responsibility of their home government.

## Develop Chittagong port fast

It must cater to our future needs

**I**T is a matter of concern when the major seaport of the country remains hamstrung by inadequacies that should not be there in the first place. It cannot be lost upon the planners that Chittagong Port, given its location, can become the hub of trading activities both international and regional, only if... and the 'if' remains the stumbling block.

It is inconceivable that the garments owners would have to count extra costs amounting to hundreds of crore in terms of air freight because of mismanagement of the port, as was the case last year. It is ludicrous too that it should take three weeks for goods to reach the container terminal in Dhaka from the port while it takes less than quarter that time for these goods to reach Chittagong from Singapore.

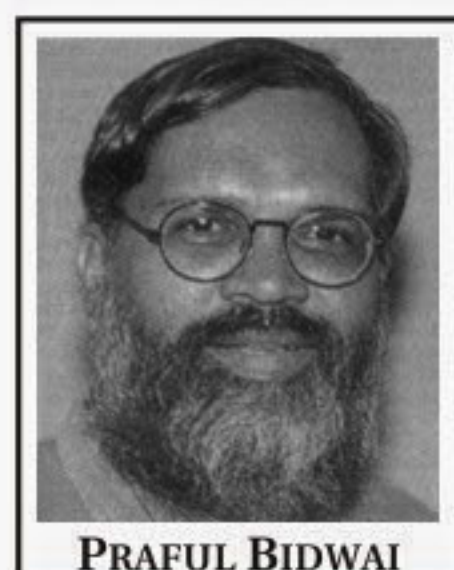
It is both a comforting as well as a matter of concern that of the existing capacity of the port nearly half of it remains unutilised. It is good that we have capacity to cater to the increased volume of cargo, particularly with India, Nepal and Bhutan the potential users. Efforts must be made for its full utilisation.

While it will be necessary to go for expanding the capacity of the port it is essential to prioritise the works in order that the essential works are done as matter of urgency. Thus expanding the capacity would mean very little if the handling capacity is not correspondingly increased in order to reduce the turn around time of the vessels.

Given that 90 percent of the country's foreign trade is through Chittagong port, and given the potential demand on it, completion of its development work cannot brook further delay. And we fully endorse all the suggestions of the stakeholders made at a seminar on Chittagong port to make it more efficient, and which the government must take note of.

## PRAFUL BIDWAI COLUMN

# Manmohan makes UPA vulnerable



PRAFUL BIDWAI

**I**N his interaction with television journalists on February 16, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh came across as a wily, run-of-the-mill

politician, adept at deflecting criticism.

Dr. Singh did what no Indian prime minister has done: plead helplessness in the face of corporate loot of public money, erosion of institutions, inflation, and failure to bring about inclusive growth.

The burden of Dr. Singh's song was this: I'm working under the constraints of coalition politics, so I can't be blamed for my government's failures. You can't doubt my integrity. Second, I have already sacked telecom minister A. Raja for the 2G spectrum scam. Third, the UPA government is doing OK: there's 8.5% GDP growth. Our policies need no revision.

Dr. Singh deplorably invoked "coalition dharma," a sordid term invented by the BJP to rationalise opportunist alliances. What "dharma" allows the DMK to milk ministries?

Why did Dr. Singh promote his own party's Vilasrao Deshmukh, indicted by the Supreme Court for protecting loan-sharks, to Rural Development, a cash cow for venal politicians?

The real issue isn't Dr. Singh's integrity, but his leadership, especially his failure to prevent corruption and abuse of power. Raja was sacked only after the Central Bureau of Investigation probed the 2G scam under the Supreme Court's supervision. His removal doesn't resolve the flaws in the telecom policy framework.

Dr. Singh can't plead helplessness on the appointment of Central Vigilance Commissioner P.J. Thomas. He personally signed the papers, violating the norm that the opposition must consent to such appointments. The Singh government's failures

are attributable to elitist policies, pampering of Big Business, and inattention to inflation, which arises from its dogmatic reluctance to intervene in the market. It's illegitimate for Dr. Singh to blame the Congress or its partners for this.

The UPA's single greatest failure -- absence of inclusive, pro-poor growth -- is directly attributable to Dr. Singh's mindlessly pro-corporate neo-liberal policies. Yet, neo-liberal "reform" is the only thing about which he spoke passionately.

Dr. Singh likened the losses from telecom scams to expenditure on food subsidies. Such subsidies are not

mount a serious political attack on the UPA and weaken it before the next general election, for at least five reasons.

First, the BJP leadership is divided and confused. Recent scandals have suddenly electrified the 83-year-old L.K. Advani into self-assertion. But his hyperactivism has upset the BJP's leadership equations, further weakened party president Nitin Gadkari (never an able candidate), and embarrassed Mr. Advani's own groupies.

Second, Mr. Advani publicly accused Ms. Sonia Gandhi of controlling a \$2.2 billion Swiss Bank account,

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losses; they represent a social gain -- correcting structural social-economic perversities which perpetuate hunger and malnutrition.

Adequate food is a fundamental right of the people; providing it is the duty of the government. Governments that cannot do this are dysfunctional and illegitimate.

Dr. Singh's government seems inclined to exploit today's high food prices to promote foreign direct investment in multi-brand retail trade. The spurious claim, that this would improve food distribution and stabilise prices, speaks of the utmost cynicism.

The opposition parties now have a unique chance to confront the UPA with alternative agendas. Alas, they are preoccupied with Assembly elections -- the Left with make-or-break polls in West Bengal and Kerala, and the Bahujan Samaj Party and Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh. That leaves the BJP. But it cannot

written to Dr. Singh offering "cooperation" in investigating the extremists involved in the recent bombings at mosques and dargahs.

It has tried to distance itself from such organisations and individuals. But they were members of the RSS and inspired by it; some like Indresh Kumar, continue to be its office-bearers.

A ban on the RSS would further shrink its declining membership, stop legal foreign funding and alienate many middle-class people. This is a big liability for the BJP and will severely limit its freedom of action.

Fourth, the BJP lacks a distinctive vision or coherent policies to counter the UPA. It is even more tied to corporate interests and neo-liberal policies, and a pro-Western foreign and security policy. The BJP in Karnataka has taken corruption to new heights. Its defector-based government has become predatory on the people. Its claim to be "a party with a difference" stands discredited.

So, when the BJP criticises the Congress/UPA for money-laundering and spiriting away funds abroad, it sounds shrill and unconvincing. It never curbed such practices during its rule at the Centre.

Now that the UPA has agreed to set up a Joint Parliamentary Committee on the 2G-scam, the BJP stands robbed of a strong issue on which to confront the UPA.

Finally, the BJP-led NDA has failed to expand beyond the Janata Dal (United), Akali Dal, Indian National Lok Dal, and Shiv Sena. No other party joined its much-touted anti-corruption campaign. Even Mr. Nitish Kumar kept away. Meanwhile, the Left parties have recruited the Telugu Desam and AIADMK into another front.

So, the BJP's prospect of emerging as an alternative pole to the UPA is bleak. It can at best hope to gain from its opponents' mistakes. Thanks to its communal sectarianism, it still remains Indian politics' Odd Man Out.

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## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 1

- 1815**  
Napoleon returns to France from his banishment on Elba.
- 1896**  
Henri Becquerel discovers radioactivity
- 1941**  
World War II: Bulgaria signs the Tripartite Pact, allying itself with the Axis powers
- 1946**  
The Bank of England is nationalized
- 1947**  
The International Monetary Fund begins financial operations.
- 1954**  
Nuclear testing: The Castle Bravo, a 15-megaton hydrogen bomb, is detonated on Bikini Atoll in the Pacific Ocean.
- 1961**  
President of the United States John F. Kennedy establishes the Peace Corps
- 1966**  
The Ba'ath Party takes power in Syria
- 1971**  
President of Pakistan Yahya Khan indefinitely postpones the pending national assembly session, precipitating massive civil disobedience in East Pakistan leading to the Bangladesh Liberation War and the Birth of Bangladesh.